

EXHIBIT 4
DATE 2/5/09
HB 344

To: Representative Jon Sesso, Chair
House Appropriations Committee

From: YWCA Missoula

Date: February 5, 2009

RE: HB 344

As the director of the YWCA Missoula, I urge you to support HB 344 to provide funding for supervised visitation services in two Montana communities. The YWCA Missoula was fortunate to receive federal funding to establish Planet Kids, a supervised visitation center in Missoula and operate it for at least the next four years. The federal monies came after nearly six years of planning in our community, during which time we identified a great need for affordable supervised visitation and exchange services for families where there's been domestic violence. Missoula, like other cities and towns in Montana had supervision services available through the Child and Family Services department for children who have been removed from the home, and through private therapists for all other families. These services were not accessible to the most of the families that we served, though, because the children were still in the custody of one parent and because the families could not afford the \$25/hr or more that private parties charged for supervision. As a result, domestic violence victims and their children were exposed to unsafe visitation and exchange situations because they didn't have neutral third parties to monitor visits between children and their noncustodial parents. I worked as a direct care staff member in our domestic shelter in the days before Planet Kids opened and I still remember how frustrating and frightening it was for the shelter staff when our shelter residents had to leave the shelter to meet with their abusive ex-partners for custody exchanges. These women were living in the shelter because their safety risks were so great that they needed a confidential place to stay, and yet they were being forced to put themselves at risk over and over again to abide by the custody orders.

Research shows that the most dangerous time for women and children living with domestic violence is when they take steps to leave the abusive relationship. I believe this legislation would significantly mitigate the risk for domestic violence victims living in Montana communities. In Missoula, where Planet Kids opened five years ago, Missoula police report a demonstrable decrease in the number law enforcement responses to conflicts arising from custody exchanges.

HB 344 calls for funding for two pilot programs for the next two years. The MBCC will administer the funding and select the pilot communities according to the criteria described in the bill. The YWCA Missoula will not be considered for this pilot funding, but I believe that it is important to support legislation that could help others in the state provide these crucial services to families in need.

The fiscal note attached to this bill represents costs for two supervised visitation centers for two full years of operations. The first year includes set-up costs, in addition to the general operating expenses. Set-up costs include necessary office equipment and security system features for the center. In Missoula, bare bones expenses for our supervised visitation center are about \$155,000 per year. HB 344 provides for up to \$125,000 per center for FY10, and up to \$100,000 per center in FY11. This amount would be sufficient for communities that are willing and able to match a portion of the state funding with local resources.

What we've realized in Missoula is that without the federal support, our community would be unable to provide these critical services and therefore children and victims of domestic violence would continue to be exposed to unsafe and potentially violent situations as a result of custodial arrangements. In Missoula, we utilize a sliding-fee scale, and as a result 50% of our clients receive services at no charge. The amount we receive from the other 50% of our clients represents less than 15% of our total operating budget. Without federal or state support, these services simply cannot be sustained by local communities, which is why there is an absence of affordable services in our state. For these reasons, I ask you to vote for HB 344 to support services for two other communities in Montana.

Cindy Weese, Executive Director
YWCA Missoula
1130 W. Broadway
Missoula, MT 59802
543-6691